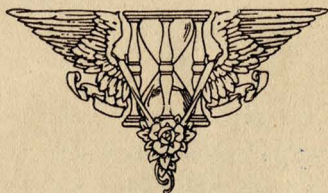


Why Study the Bible?

A LECTURE DELIVERED BEFORE THE
MEN'S BIBLE CLASS OF THE FIRST PRES-
BYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENSBORO, N. C.



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BY
W. C. SMITH

I am sorry for men who do not read the Bible every day; I wonder why they deprive themselves of the strength and of the pleasure. It is one of the most singular books in the world, for every time you open it, some old text that you have read a score of times suddenly beams with a new meaning. There is no other book that I know of, of which this is true; there is no other book that yields its meaning so personally, that seems to fit itself so intimately to the very spirit that is seeking its guidance.—Woodrow Wilson.

The Men's Bible Class of The First Presbyterian Church of Greensboro, N. C., presents this pamphlet with its compliments and extends to you a cordial invitation to attend the Class which meets every Sunday morning in the Church Annex at 10 o'clock.

This discourse on "Why study the bible" was delivered by our teacher, Prof. W. C. Smith, and will give you an idea of the entertaining and instructive lectures enjoyed by those who attend.

The Class membership is now over two hundred and growing rapidly. One visit makes you feel like going again. A cordial welcome awaits every one and we hope to have the pleasure of your presence with us.

Presented by

Why Study the Bible?

I WISH, with your permission, to turn aside from the particular passage assigned for our study to day, and to invite your consideration of a topic which appeals to me at this stage of our class existence as one of the most important that could command our attention. We have formed a voluntary organization known as the Men's Bible Class, an organization now 200 strong, whose prime purpose is the study of the Bible. In business life you do not enlist your capital, your time, and your energies without some sane expectations that you will derive adequate returns from your investment. You will not invest much in a scheme of which you are ignorant and from which you have no well defined hope of profitable returns.

Our business here is the study of the Bible, and, as stimulating confidence in that business, I want to raise the question—Why this organization and this investment of time and energy? What may I and my associates hope to derive from it? In other words, my subject is—Why Study the Bible?

I.

Let us approach that question with another, namely, *What is the Bible?*

Perhaps the simplest and briefest answer to that question is—"It is a book; a book of religious instruction." But here is my opportunity to direct your attention to larger conceptions. The Bible is more than a book: It is a collection of sixty-six books by thirty-six authors whose lives extend over a period of 1500 years. It is a library,—a whole literature.

Here are a series of historical books dealing with the movements of men and of nations in war and in peace for more than two thousand years. Here are a series of biographies of great men,—rulers, statesmen, warriors, prophets, sages, authors, teachers and legislators,—men engaged in a wide variety of professions and achieving varying measures of success or failure: men whose careers illustrate almost every variety of fortune—success, wealth, eminence, distinction and power;—poverty, defeat, discouragement.

ment, failure and disgrace. Here are long census reports of names and numbers as dry as the government compilations of our own times; and here are thrilling stories of war, love and adventure, fresh, live and interesting after the passing of a thousand years. Here are volumes of poetry—religious and meditative hymns, songs of war and victory, chants of love and marriage, odes of triumph for the living and elegies for the dead. Here are great bodies of laws, civil and religious, reflecting important changes in civilization and embodying high ideals of society and government. Here are letters, orations, prophecies and visions, philosophy, essays and collections of proverbs, all in wide and frequent use centuries after their authors have mouldered into dust. A book? yes more than a book! A literature, "born in the East and clothed in oriental form and imagery," but walking the ways of all the world, translated into every tongue, and treasured as the most precious possession of every people; lisped by the babe at its mother's knee, quoted by strong men in the crises of life and coming in whispered accents from the lips of those who are done with the wisdom of men: a literature surpassed in interest and beauty, and variety and depth, and in excellence of style and expression by no other body or collection of writings in the world.

As a student and teacher, one who has given the best years of his life to books and literature, I might, perhaps, be supposed to have an opinion on this subject, but it is to more eminent witnesses and to abler and more expert testimony that I wish particularly to direct your attention.

II.

Regarded simply as a model of literary expression, the Bible is our unmatched standard of excellence. From the time of Caedmon and the first coherent words of English speech, to present-day Kipling—a long period of 1300 years, the influence of the Bible upon English speech has been virtually uninterrupted. It is of the age of Shakespeare that we naturally think when literary excellence is our theme. And it is this very age that Green, the English historian, says was leavened with the literature of the Bible. "All the prose literature of England," writes this scholar and historian, "save the forgotten tracts of Wyclif, has grown up since the translation of the scriptures by Tyndale and Coverdale. As a mere literary monument, the English version of the Bible remains the noblest example of the English tongue, while its per-

petual use made it, from the instant of its appearance, the standard of our language."

Benjamin Franklin bears testimony to his indebtedness to the Bible as a model of style, and if actual testimony were wanting on his part, there is abundant evidence in the writings of this self-educated man, whether in the wise sayings of his *Poor Richard* or in the clear, simple, homely but dignified style of his autobiography, to convince us of his marked indebtedness to the Book of Books.

Last summer, in Madison, Wisconsin, I heard much of one of its honored citizens, Judge Anthony Donovan. Like Franklin he was a self-educated man, never having had, so he said in one of his addresses, more than a few month's schooling in the first forty years of his life. At sixteen he became a blacksmith—a trade that he continued for twenty-three years. I wish with your permission to present Judge Donovan as a witness.

"Up to the time I went to learn the blacksmith trade, I had no education to speak of. I could hardly read. In the fall of 1869 the Rev. Father Garashae came to Madison and delivered a lecture on the education of the Christian boy. I accidentally attended the lecture and received such an inspiration and love for books and learning that I determined, with God's help and my own industry, that I would make every effort I possibly could to acquire an education. My resolution to study and read was immovably fixed after listening to the lecture and my intellectual appetite grew by what it fed upon. The first book I bought was the Bible. I bought it in numbers—two numbers per month at fifty cents per number. It was published in thirty-two numbers. I read it from Genesis to Apocalypse. I need not say that I derived more knowledge and wisdom from its reading and study than all the books I have read since. I know that the Bible is sneered at by superficial men and scoffed at by others, but I believe it is a book of facts as well authenticated as any heathen history—a book of miracles incontestably proved; a book of prophecy, confirmed by past as well as present fulfillment; a book of poetry pure and natural, and elevated even to inspiration; a book of morals such as human wisdom never framed for the perfection of human happiness. I will abide by the precepts, admire the beauty, and, as far as in me lies, practice the mandates of this sacred volume. If I err, I err with St. Paul and the Apostles, with Bacon, with Milton; with Newman and all the Christian churches. With men like these, and such or-

ganizations, I shall remain in error, and cling to the heavenly and holy inspiration it inculcates. Its study elevates the moral character, enlightens the darkness and purifies the hearts of those who drink from its fountain of wisdom and knowledge."

Great lawyers, always ready to seize a bond of sympathy between themselves and their audience, have been quick to use the Bible as a means of convincing appeal. Burke did so, and Lincoln; and Bryan does so today. In all the years of our history it has been the only book well enough known to quote with the assurance that its quotations will be recognized and accepted by the great mass of the common people. Using it, you are using what is read and known by seven-tenths of the population of the world.

John Ruskin, perhaps the most versatile, certainly the most eloquently beautiful of modern prose writers, after enriching the world with a body of writings so extensive, so varied, so numerous that we stand amazed that they can possibly be the product of one man's brain and pen:—this apostle of the beautiful whose range of learning covered every phase of nature, every type of art, the entire field of history and all rules of human society; this learned scholar and eloquent writer sums up his intellectual achievements in these words:

"My mother forced me, by steady daily toil, to learn long chapters of the Bible by heart; as well as to read it every syllable through, aloud, hard names and all, from Genesis to the Apocalypse, about once a year; and to that discipline—patient, accurate, and resolute—I owe not only a knowledge of the book,—but much of my general power of taking pains, and the best part of my taste in literature. Once knowing the 32nd Deuteronomy, the 119th Psalm, the the 15th of 1st Corinthians, the Sermon on the Mount and most of the Apocalypse, every syllable by heart, and having always a way of thinking with myself what words meant, it was not possible for me, even in the foolishhest times of youth, to write entirely superficial or formal English."

"As soon as I was able to read with fluency, she began a course of Bible work with me, which never ceased till I went to Oxford. She read alternate verses with me, watching, at first, every intonation of my voice, and correcting the false ones, till she made me understand,—rightly and energetically." Here follows a list of chapters from Exodus, Samuel, Kings, Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, Matthew, Acts, Corinthians, James and Revelation—that he had to learn by heart, his mother—"allowing not so much as a syllable to be missed or misplaced; while every sentence was required to be said over and over again till she was satis-

fied with the accent of it." "And truly," the great author concludes, "though I have picked up the elements of a little further knowledge,—in mathematics, meteorology, and the like, in after life,—this maternal installation of my mind in that property of chapters I count very confidently the most precious, and on the whole, the one *essential* part of all my education."

Any thoughtful reader of the speeches of Webster will see his indebtedness to the Bible, not simply in the numerous passages effectively quoted, but in the whole matter of style and expression. We are told that he never delivered a great speech without, as the last element of his preparation, repeating aloud some eloquently beautiful passage of considerable length from the Bible.

What is true of these great writers and orators is true of many others. Examine anew your favorite passage of eloquence and the chances are that you will discern in it the old Testament ring—the impress of the style that we call Biblical.

Vance's knowledge of the scriptures was proverbial. (Dowd, his biographer, tells us that the great Commoner not only studied the Bible diligently but studied it regularly and topically. "He did not read the Bible by snatches, as a good many people do, but by subjects and periods, frequently perusing it for hours at a time.")

The effect of this is clearly shown in all his speeches. Some would have us believe that the effect is chiefly seen in his many humorous allusions to Biblical themes. But this I am convinced is a mistake. His most moving appeals, his most eloquent passages, are decidedly Biblical in thought and in expression.

I have here today one of his most eloquent addresses, generally considered his greatest lecture. From opening sentence to closing syllable it gives evidence of his faithful study of the Bible and of his sincere admiration for the Jewish people and the teachings of the word of God.

Permit me to read a few sentences that you may hear his voice speaking as of old and realize for yourselves the influence of the Bible upon his speech and thought.

"Time would not permit me if I had the power, to describe the chief city of the Jews, their religions and political capital—'Jerusalem the Holy'—'the dwelling of peace.' In the days of Jewish prosperity, it was in all things a fair type of this strange country and people. Enthroned upon the hills of Judah, overflowing with riches, the free-will offerings of a devoted people, it was the rival in power and wondrous beauty of the most magnificent cities of antiquity. Nearly every one of her great com-

petitors have mouldered into dust. The bat and the owl inhabit their towers, and the fox litters her young in the corridors of their palaces, but Jerusalem still sits in solitary grandeur upon the lonely hills, and though faded, feeble and ruinous still towers in *moral* splendor above all the spires and domes and pinnacles ever erected by human hands. Nor can I dwell, tempting as is the theme, upon the scenery, the glowing landscapes, the cultivated fields, gardens and vineyards and gurgling fountains of that pleasant land. The beauty of that band of God's people, the charm of their songs, the comeliness of their maidens, the celestial peace of their homes, the romance of their national history, and the sublimity of their faith, so entice me, that I would not know when to cease, should I once enter upon their story."

"I believe that there is a morning to open yet for the Jews in Heaven's good time, and if that opening shall be in any way commensurate with the darkness of the night through which they have passed, it will be the brightest that ever dawned upon a faithful people."

"I have stood on the summit of the very monarch of our great Southern Alleghanies and have seen the night flee away before the chariot wheels of the God of day. As the curtain was lifted more and more and the eastern brightness grew in radiance and in glory, animate nature prepared to receive her Lord; the tiny snow-bird from its nest in the turf began chirping to its young; the silver pheasant sounded its morning drum-beat for its mate in the boughs of the fragrant fir; the dun deer rising slowly from his mossy couch and stretching himself in graceful curves, began to crop the tender herbage; whilst the lordly eagle, rising straight upward from his home on the crag, bared his golden breast to the yellow beams and screamed his welcome to the sun. Soon the vapors of the night were lifted up on shafts of fire, until, far overhead, they were caught upon the wings of the morning breeze and swept away. Perfect day was established and there was peace. So may it be with this long-suffering and immortal people. So may the real spirit of Christ yet be so triumphantly infused amongst those who profess to obey his teachings, that with one voice and one hand they will stay the persecutions and hush the sorrows of these their wondrous kinsmen, put them forward into the places of honor and the homes of love where all the lands in which they dwell, shall be to them as was Jerusalem to their fathers. So may the morning come, not to them alone, but to all the children of men who, through much tribulation and

with heroic manhood have waited for its dawning, with a faith whose constant cry through all the dreary watches of the night has been, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him!" "

I have called but a few on the long roll of eminent names at our service I might have summoned,—and surely as a former teacher in this Sabbath school and of this very class, he would have been glad to testify,—the honored Judge Robert P. Dick. It is well known that he was not only one of the most eloquent of the sons of the State but that he was also one of the most diligent Bible students that ever lived in our midst. Before his law school he regularly delivered, from year to year, a series of lectures on the Bible which at the demand of his students were printed and ought to be reprinted and widely disseminated.

Why study the Bible? Study it because of its greatness as literature, and because by the testimony of competent witnesses, no other book is so efficient an agency in helping you to a mastery of good writing.

III.

Study the Bible because it is an essential part of a liberal education. Whatever may be our views as to the value or necessity of a collegiate education, no man wants to be palpably ignorant of the things known to his fellow men. Now there is no other book which reflects so many sides and aspects of human experience as the Bible, and that fact alone would suffice to give it, a worldwide interest and make it, what it is, the most popular book in the world. Talk about the popularity of fiction and of the necessity of keeping up with the best sellers! Where do "best sellers" stand when compared with the Bible? There were sold last year more copies of the Bible than of any other hundred books of the world combined! You will never read it alone. Open its pages at any possible hour of the day or night, and you are but one of thousands who at that same hour are seeking guidance, and comfort, and wisdom and strength from the same perennial source.

No man can be said to be passably well informed who is ignorant of the Bible. No man can understand and appreciate other literatures; no man can interpret the movements of history for the past thousand years; no man can understand the growth of democracy, the emancipation of the oppressed, the widening sphere of womens' influence, the conception of the

rights of childhood, the duty of the State to its citizens, the origin and growth of benevolent orders, and protective associations, rescue work in all its phases, the energy manifest in missionary enterprizes, and the efforts of communities, states and nations to alleviate distress—who is unacquainted with the Bible. The Bible appeals to us through all the arts—poetry, painting, sculpture and music. No man can rightly appreciate great hymns, or the master paintings, or the loftiest conceptions of the human mind in marble or the best in poetry who is ignorant of the Bible.

There is not an English poet of any eminence from Shakespeare down to the present day, whose pages are not sown with Biblical passages, references and allusions. That Milton or Cowper, or Wordsworth, or Scott should draw freely upon the Bible is perhaps not surprising, but that Byron and Arnold and Browning and Kipling—should vie with the religious poets in a free use of its pages is a little more than remarkable. More than a score of Byron's poems are on subjects taken directly from the Bible; while, as for quotations and references, there are 200 in a single poem of Tennyson's and more than 500 in one of Browning's. More remarkable still is the influence of the Bible upon our every day speech. Our spoken language blossoms with it, and the man who does not know his Bible misses much of the pith and point and even humor of the daily conversation that goes on about him. Consider for example the following: as strong as Sampson, a veritable Goliath, a son of Annanias, a mournful Jeremiah, the afflictions or patience of Job, a Jobs' comforter, the wealth or the wisdom of Solomon, an Ichabod or Jonah or Joseph, the lust of the eye, the pride of life, the lilies of the field, the pure in heart, vanity of vanities, vexation of spirit, the widow's mite, a crown of glory, a mother in Israel, bearing his burden or cross, the good physician, a wise master-builder, the kiss of Judas, the voice of Jacob, the hand of Esau, a crown of thorns, the highways and hedges, the flesh-pots of Egypt, more precious than rubies, the bread of life, the staff of his old age, rose of Sharon, the root of the matter, the salt of the earth, the valley of decision, songs of Zion, the signs of the time, strong in the faith, whiter than snow, the fiery furnace, the golden calf, the silver cord, the golden bowl, weariness of the flesh, sweeter than honey, the depths of the sea, pearls of great price, pearls before swine, valley of the shadow, sackcloth and ashes, the ancient landmarks, line upon line, clear as crystal, weighed in the balances, bow in the clouds, babel of tongues, ark of safety,

Sodom and Gommorrah, fat of the land, dust of the earth, sands of the sea, swifter than eagles, the wings of the morning, the ends of the earth—and hundreds more which if cut from our daily speech would make it difficult to commune with our fellow men.

One of your own sons, Dr. C. Alphonso Smith, has borne eloquent testimony to the literary claims of the Bible. "I Yield," he says, "to no one in my admiration of the classical literatures, of the modern literatures, and of the more technical literature of scientific achievement. But in vividness and intensity, in elevation of appeal, in the extent of her literary empire, and in the duration of her sovereignty, the Bible takes easy and secure precedence. The advanced nations of the world are the children of her fireside; the centuries themselves have been but handmaidens in her service. There is no modern literature worthy the name that has not felt her influence; there is no regnant people whose strivings she has not shepherded"

Yes, the Bible is an essential part of a liberal education.

IV.

Finally, *Study the Bible as a standard of measurement for the making of men.* Above all other books it has the power of appealing to the highest and best in man, and it has this power apart from religious belief. Men of all churches and men of no church, men who are deeply religious and men who profess no religious creed, go to it with a like certainty of being stimulated and uplifted. It is the Book of God and therefore the book for mankind. Its power to quicken men is quite independent of its use in the church and is by no means limited to its use as a source of religious belief. Its truths and its appeal are fundamental and universal. It reaches down to the common roots of all human nature and the sustenance which it supplies is life-giving, and therefore satisfying. More than any other book in the world it deals with great questions of universal and ever-enduring significance. What is the real meaning of the world? Who is in control of things? Is there in its government a plan, a well ordered scheme, a definite progression toward a desirable end or goal? When and how do I fit into this ordered scheme? What is my relation to my fellow-man? what is my life; what should be its purpose; what is its destiny? These questions are universal—quite regardless of race, nationality, belief, time, place, condition or profession. They are problems of humanity, problems of life!

And for any real answer to these questions, we must in the final analysis turn to the Bible.

It gives us the highest ideal of motives, thought, conduct and action, the truest incentive to right thinking and living,—a safe and universal standard of government for individuals and society. None so poor and helpless that he is not uplifted by it: none so wise and powerful that he is not made better by a living knowledge of its precepts. It comes into the palace to tell the monarch and the millionaire that he is a servant of the most High: it comes into the cottage to tell the poor and the discouraged that he is a prince, a son of God.

Throughout the whole Book there is a developing sense and unfolding revelation of a God whose sway is that of wisdom and justice and righteousness and love,—the conformity to whose will is the duty and the happiness of man. It states in no uncertain terms the fundamental principles governing success or failure in life. By its study we correct our individual standards and measurements. It helps us to view things in their proper perspective: to put first things first, to see big things big, and small things small; to catch a vision extending beyond the present and to lay the foundation of life as one who builds not for the hour but for eternity. It is the book to live by and labor by, and hope by and in calm assurance, to die by; a safe and approved guide from cradle to grave and the only revelation of what lies beyond.

Seal not the sayings of this Book for it is, indeed and in truth, *the Book of Life*.

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